

A Line in the Sand
John 8:2-11 (and Numbers 5:11-31)
© Stacey Steck
Preached March 4, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica

Some of you will have heard about the other famous version of this story from John, the one whose ending goes something like this: “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone.’ And so an old woman picked up a stone and threw it at the adulterous woman, hitting her right in the head. And then Jesus said, “You know, Mom, sometimes you really make my life difficult.”

I admit it: I am intrigued by what Jesus wrote on the ground. And I’m intrigued by why the story doesn’t tell us what it was. I know it doesn’t really matter, that the point of the story is grace and hope for a new future, that the story confronts all of our sin and hypocrisy, but I am still stuck on the words or the symbol or the design he stooped to draw in the dirt beneath the feet of those gathered that day to trap him. Why didn’t someone just pull out their cellphone and take a picture?

But I do have a theory, and that theory is this: that the word Jesus writes on the ground the first time he writes something is the Hebrew word **שטה** (*sotah*), meaning “to go astray”. And the second time he stops and writes, he writes this:

קנאה (*qin’ah*) or spirit of jealousy. Both of these words come from a frankly

bizarre and awful passage in the fifth chapter of the book of Numbers, but I think that is exactly the point of Jesus using them, which I hope you will be able to see in a moment. And even if they are not what Jesus wrote that day, I hope they will bring us closer to an understanding of what happened that day, and what it means for us this Lent.

Let me begin by explaining a little bit about the so-called Sotah ritual for those of you, like me, who may not be up on all of your Old Testament purification rituals. In Numbers 5:11-31, there is described what the people of Israel should do in the case of a man who suspects, but has no first hand evidence, that his wife has been unfaithful, *sotah*, the man who is overcome by a “spirit of jealousy” and suspects she has been unfaithful, whether she has or not. According to the book *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, “The Torah determines that a husband who suffers from [this] ‘spirit of jealousy’ and suspects his wife must bring her to the priest at the Tabernacle. There the priest performs a series of ritual acts: he offers a ‘meal-offering of jealousy,’ [which is] an offering of ground barley without oil or frankincense, unbinds the woman’s hair, makes her swear an oath that she had sexual relations with no man other than her husband, writes the oath in a scroll and erases it in water mixed with dust from the Tabernacle, and finally makes the woman drink the mixture. This mixture, which the Torah calls ‘the bitter, curse-causing waters,’ contains the oath and the curses that accompany it, and ultimately determines the woman’s fate. As the woman drinks the potion,

the outcome of the trial appears on her body, confirming or refuting her husband's suspicions: If she is guilty, the water will cause the woman to become infertile – the Hebrew expressions are ‘her thigh falls’ and ‘her belly distends’ and are probably euphemisms for harm to her reproductive organs -- but if she is innocent the water will do her no harm and even cause her to become fertile.” Ladies, doesn’t that sound like fun?

So you got all that? That if a husband thinks his wife is cheating on him, there is this means of testing that fact whereby God will either convict or vindicate the woman on the basis of whether her body is harmed by a potion designed to provoke the very reaction that indicates guilt. They make her drink water mixed with dirt, and mixed with the ink or the charcoal or whatever it was with which they wrote the curse on the tablet, basically a kind of poison, and if she is innocent, God will make sure nothing happens to her. Sort of like at the Salem witch trials in seventeenth century Massachusetts where women accused of being witches were tied hand and foot and thrown into a river or a lake and if they floated, they were witches, and were executed. If they sank, then they innocent, but they would probably drown anyway. And all of this is on top on the fact that the crown jewel of her beauty, her hair, has been disheveled by the priest, an act of extreme humiliation. On one hand, the ritual seems to be both a deterrent to infidelity in the first place, but also designed to provoke a confession in the case of actual guilt before it is ever undertaken. It seems likely that the very threat of the Sotah ritual

would have been enough to make some women come clean, or maybe even confess to a crime they did not commit. Who would want to submit both to the humiliation and to the physical effects of the ritual if they were already guilty?

On that same hand, some say that the Sotah ritual actually served to protect women from jealous husbands exacting their revenge on innocent victims, and that it may have served as a deterrent against men bringing the charge, because “The husband, too, must weigh the consequences of being right in his suspicions, in which case his hopes for children by his wife are ended, or being wrong, in which case he will be publicly recognized as one who gave in to a false ‘spirit of jealousy’.” There is that too, I suppose, but on the other hand, doesn’t it seem just a little cruel and unevenly applied? Where is the other suspected adulterer, in other words, the man? Where is the test for a husband whose wife thinks he has been unfaithful but can’t prove it? If you are wondering about this double standard, you are not the only one, and in fact, at least as far back as Jesus’ time, so were the Rabbis, the ones charged with interpreting these laws, and this is where this Sotah ritual comes to meet our passage from John tonight.

So let’s regroup with this ancient ritual in the backs of our minds. Jesus is teaching in the temple, minding his own business we could say, when a bunch of the scribes and Pharisees bring before him, and everyone else, this unnamed woman whom they say has been caught in the act of adultery, even though they supply no witnesses, and two were required, and even though they don’t bring the

male culprit. If you are wondering about this double standard, you are not the only one. And they ask Jesus whether or not the woman should be given the death penalty because, they say, “in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women.” So let’s be clear, they are using Scripture to try to make their case, going back to the twenty-second chapter of the book of Deuteronomy where the penalty for adultery is described, and where it is to be imposed on both the male and the female. But what is also being made clear to us, the reader, is that they are doing this not because they respect his opinion as a teacher of the law, but in order “to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.” They want to catch Jesus in a damned if you do, damned if you don’t statement, kind of like the Sotah ritual. And so the guilt or innocence of the woman in the story is actually sort of irrelevant to the scribes and the Pharisees who are simply using her for their own purposes, subjecting her to a public, one-sided, and unnecessary humiliation simply to try to make their case against Jesus.

And so Jesus stoops down and writes with his finger on the ground, those famous, but unknown words that I want to suggest tonight are the Hebrew letters that spell “sotah.” And why would Jesus write those words, when the woman brought before him has been accused of being caught in the act of adultery, and not just suspected without evidence which was the case when the Sotah ritual was used? Why would he apply that ancient ritual to this current situation? I think it is because he recognized that what they were trying to do to him, was what a jealous

husband tried to do to his wife, and what he meant to tell them, to spell out for them in plain and clear language, that what they were doing was more than just a little cruel and unevenly applied. You see, the woman before him was to be his bitter potion, to test his fidelity, to see if God would save him. Just like a woman made to drink the water of the Sotah, he would suffer, either from humiliation, by being shown to not adhere to the law of Moses if he decided she should not die (losing his credibility as a teacher of the law), or bodily, if he was shown to not adhere to the law of the Empire, since the Jews were not allowed to impose capital punishment on their own. And so he reminds them of the barbarity of that ancient ritual, a ritual considered so awful and unfair that by the time of Jesus its use had been discontinued.

Of course, they don't really get the message, and they keep on questioning him, and so Jesus must speak it in a new way, and so he utters his famous, and often repeated comeback, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," and they begin to scatter, "one by one, beginning with the elders." Have you ever wondered why Jesus' statement, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," was so effective? We often read this as some great comeback by Jesus wherein he so startles his opponents with common sense, and their own hypocrisy, that they suddenly "get it," and are left without much else to say. But have you ever really seen that work on anyone, especially anyone so adamant as his opponents that day? Sure, maybe you can convince a friend that way, when you are someone they trust

and admire, but someone out to get you, to make your life difficult? No one gives up that easily, especially when they think they have the Bible on their side. And so we are left with the fact that in what Jesus said, there was something Scriptural that they could recognize trumped their own case. Jesus answers their Scripture with Scripture, like he does with the devil in the desert during the temptations. But if you look in the Bible, you will not find, apart from Jesus saying it here, the phrase “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” It’s not in Proverbs, not in the Psalms, not in the Torah or the Prophets. But it has its roots in the Rabbinical interpretations of the Sotah ritual, a fact of which he reminds them, along with the consequences of being publicly seen as husband possessed unjustly by that unbecoming “spirit of jealousy.” You see, at the very end of Numbers chapter five, was a statement that those who found the Sotah cruel and unusual punishment could interpret in a new and helpful way, a way Jesus seizes upon here. After all the description of that awful ritual it says, “The man (meaning her husband) shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity.” What the Rabbis had done with that phrase, in true Rabbinical spirit, was to play with the grammar of the text, so as to interpret its real meaning, God’s real intent, as, “*if* the man is clear of sin, then the woman shall bear her sin,” in other words, she is liable to punishment only if her accuser leads a blameless life himself. The grammatical part aside, you may wonder how the Rabbis came up with this interpretation, and the answer is that they realized that it takes two to tango, and that men were just as

responsible for the act of adultery as the women being suspected, and that the Sotah was simply patently unfair. And so they found a way around it, a way which was affirmed by the majority, a way faithful to Scripture and authority, and a way Jesus could use against those who would test him and his faithfulness. And they even used Scripture to justify their interpretation by quoting Hosea, where it says, ‘I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, for they themselves [i.e., the men] go apart with whores’. (Hos 4:14). Thus, the rabbis have ruled against a practice that discriminates against women on the grounds that everyone is corrupt.

Of course, what is new here is that Jesus was not applying it to the actual situation of adultery which they brought before him, but to their efforts to test his fidelity, to their “spirit of jealousy” about him, a rival teacher, and so, when he writes in the dirt the second time, I want to suggest that he reminds them just what their sin is, and so he writes qin’ah, “the Spirit of Jealousy” to let them know he is onto them and to remind them that they are not blameless, and so he cannot be convicted of the unfaithfulness of which they are accusing him.

So what does all of this have to do with you, tonight, this Lent and our theme of remembering? Well, for that part, we must return once again to Numbers, chapter five, and the offering of jealousy that the husband was required to bring to undertake the ritual of the Sotah. It says there that the husband is to bring “a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to

remembrance.” Let me repeat that: “A grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.” “The “grain offering of remembrance” is not intended to remind the wife, if guilty, of her trespass; rather it is meant to cause Yahweh to take notice of it by bringing the case before him. If he forgets sin, it is unpunished; his remembering is the cause of the punishment now.’ Jesus’ response to the Scribes and Pharisees is to say that they should bring a grain offering of remembrance for themselves, not for others, but for themselves, to remind God of their own sins, and to let themselves be convicted and then pardoned of their own sins. Remember, the point of bringing ‘grain offering of remembrance’ is to bring ‘iniquity to remembrance,’ to God’s review and judgment and finally cleansing and pardon.

I’m coming in for a landing soon, fear not. Whatever we might speculate about what Jesus actually drew in the sand, whether it was the words I have suggested or anything else, it served as the proverbial “line in the sand,” that line we dare others to cross to come and get us. In this case, he dared them to step into that realm of self-reflection and self-examination that is the hallmark of the season on Lent. The right side of the line is the one which calls us to attend to our own sin, not the sin of others, to remember that it takes two to tango, to remember our own iniquity and beg God to forgive it instead of focusing on the iniquity of others and how God can punish it. This is the season to ask whether you have been *sotah*, gone astray from God, or from your spouse, or from your discipleship, and to

examine in your own life the *qin 'ah*, the “spirit of jealousy” which might lead you to hurt or humiliate others. You see, when we do that, when we each go to our own homes and attend to our own sins, each of us will find ourselves in the position of the woman in our story. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” And it is in that encounter with Jesus, when the clutter of accusations and recriminations by others is cleared away, that we can actually hear the words of Jesus calling us to new life, to a future filled with grace, to a life in which we are no longer defined by sin but defined by the sinless one. This Lent, as you bring your ‘grain offering of remembrance’ to bring your ‘iniquity to remembrance,’ remember that only Jesus Christ is in a position to condemn, and that he alone says to you what he said to the woman that day, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.” Amen.